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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 002871

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SUBJECT: DAMASCUS SEES FLURRY OF VISITS, MEETINGS LINKED TO
PALESTINIAN ISSUES

REF: DAM 1853

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Visiting Palestinian Authority (PA) FM Zahar met June 13 with Syrian FM Mu'allim to discuss the situation in the Palestinian territories, as well as the Palestinian-Syrian bilateral relationship, according to the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). The head of the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) political bureau, Farouk Qaddoumi, also visited Damascus this week, meeting with several representatives of Palestinian rejectionist groups. They asked for his help in postponing the July 26 referendum until the end of the national dialogue, now expected to start in Damascus during the first week of July, according to a regional newspaper. Damascus-based rejectionist groups are apparently deeply divided among themselves, with most of the groups seeking to undermine Hamas' power, according to several diplomats here. We suspect that Syria won't take action on any requests by visitors that might undermine the strength of one of its most important foreign policy "cards," Hamas. We also suspect that the SARG is happily watching as visitors come and go from Damascus, signaling once again to the West Syria's importance as an influential intermediary in Palestinian affairs. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Visiting Palestinian Authority (PA) FM Mahmoud Zahar met June 13 with Syrian FM Walid al-Mu'allim to discuss the situation in the Palestinian territories, as well as the Palestinian-Syrian bilateral relationship, according to the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). Mu'allim stressed the need to continue the Palestinian national dialogue in the interest of the Palestinian people, according to regional media reports. Zahar and Mu'allim also met separately with Damascus-based Hamas leader Khalid Mish'al, who renewed his rejection of PA President Mahmoud Abbas' (Abu Mazen) referendum on the "prisoners' document" set for July 26, according to regional media. Zahar said in Damascus that a plan to create a Palestinian state alongside Israel would only "ignite internal strife" among Palestinian factions, according to an article by the Associated Press. It was Zahar's second trip to Syria in less than two months (reftel A).

¶3. (U) The head of the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) political bureau, Farouk Qaddoumi, also visited Damascus this week, meeting with several representatives of Palestinian rejectionist groups, including the SYG of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), Nayef Hawatmeh; the head of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Ramadan Shallah; the Damascus representative of the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP),

Maher al-Taher; the SYG of the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF), Abu Nidal al-Ashqar; and the SYG for the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF), Khalid Abd al-Majid. Representatives of those factions asked Qaddoumi to intervene with Abbas to postpone the July 26 referendum until the end of the national dialogue, now expected to start in Damascus during the first week of July, according to Al-Safir newspaper. Qaddoumi was also expected to meet with Mish'al, Al-Safir reported.

¶4. (C) Egyptian and Saudi envoys have also made unannounced trips to Damascus in the last few weeks, according to a June 15 Al-Hayat report that suggested without further detail that these visits were also linked to Palestinian issues. (Note: An Egyptian diplomat, however, discounted the possibility of any such visits by Egyptian officials.) The Al-Hayat report speculated that the SARG was seeking to persuade Hamas to accept the "Arab Initiative" adopted by leaders of Arab nations at the March 2002 Beirut Summit, which called for Israeli steps that would lead to Arab recognition of Israel. Palestinian sources told Al-Hayat that Palestinian PM Ismail Haniyeh might eventually accept the Arab Initiative, with its implicit recognition of Israel, while Hamas' external leaders such as Mish'al would maintain the movement's ideological position without a change.

¶5. (C) Damascus-based rejectionist groups are apparently deeply divided among themselves. An Austrian diplomat recounted a conversation from a June 12 meeting with DFLP's Hawatmeh who asserted that, with the exception of PIJ, the Damascus-based factions were discussing ways to oppose any Hamas moves toward an Islamic Palestinian government and a revamping of the PLO that would permit Hamas' control over it. Hawatmeh also claimed that all of the Palestinian

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factions, except Hamas and PIJ, wanted to support the prisoners' document and Abbas' referendum, which they hope will eventually lead to the demise of the Hamas government, the diplomat said.

¶6. (C) There are rumors in Damascus about separate meetings between Mish'al and three European ambassadors resident in Damascus. An Arab diplomat told us the ambassadors had reportedly pushed Mish'al to recognize Israel and past Palestinian-Israeli agreements. Mish'al was said to have responded "in a clever way" by asking the ambassadors whether Israel would recognize Hamas and respect all of Israel's past agreements, as well as comply with past UNSC resolutions, the diplomat said. An Austrian diplomat said that she had also heard rumors of such meetings with Mish'al, adding that "it wasn't Austria" and that she didn't know which, if any, ambassadors might have held such meetings. She speculated that any EU ambassador who met the Hamas leader must have been acting on instructions from his/her capital because such a meeting would be a violation of EU policy.

¶7. (C) Comment: We suspect that Syria won't take action on any requests by visitors that might undermine the strength of one of its most important foreign policy "cards," Hamas. According to the Egyptian diplomat, visiting PA Special Envoy Ahmad Qureia earlier this month asked President Asad for help in easing tensions between Hamas and other Palestinian groups. Asad promised Qureia that he would do what he can, but SARG officials later hinted to Egyptian diplomats here that they would not take any steps that would undercut their relationship with Hamas, the diplomat said. Syrian officials have also indicated that since Hamas probably cannot withstand international pressure on it in the long run, they prefer to keep all of their options open, the diplomat said. We also suspect that the SARG is happily watching as visitors come and go from Damascus, signaling once again to the West Syria's importance as an influential intermediary in Palestinian affairs. As noted by one long-time Embassy contact and advocate of back-channel talks between Syria and the U.S., the SARG would prefer to keep the fires burning to

show that they can be helpful or less helpful, depending on what it is offered in exchange.
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